As among most of the earth's people, ghost stories and legends have always fascinated the Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico.

Legends have been used to convey messages to a moralistic people and also to scare the children on a winter's night before a big fire.

In the area around Belen, New Mexico, such legends have always abounded. For working men and farmers, for wives and children, the eerie, the bizarre have always been a staple legendary commodity.

Some legends have been repeated widely and even turn up in other sections of the state and Southwest. Others seem to have a pecularly regional flavor, such as items concerning the Penitentes and ghostly figures.

The old men and women know the stories...the young do not. The educated scoff at the tales and say that even if they had heard them, they have forgotten them by now. But even their eyes get wider as they learn of their supernatural heritage.

Religion, especially, seems to play a large role. One must understand the Catholic traditions before enjoying the flavor of a Chicano folk-ghost.

One must, usually, also understand the semi-archaic Spanish used in the area. But even without these aids, the legends rise chillingly up the spine of the listener.

The first legend that must be explored is the most common in the area. I was told of the legend by at least ten people, all of whom conveyed the yarn a little differently.

The account here will be given by the only one who had actually claimed to have seen the ghost (althought many of the others said they have heard the apparation.

Carmelita Lopez, 19, has lived in the area most of her life. A treasure trove of ghostly lore, Carmelita was known in my high school class as an honest, very businesslike person. She has been through the Technical-Vocational Institute and is currently working as an accountant with General Electric in Albuquerque.

"'La Llarona' means the crybaby. She always wears black and goes wandering around on the ditches. She likes to scare people and hides in the trees and jumps out. She's always crying because she's looking for her babies. She had three. The first one she burned to death in a fire. The second she drowned in a ditch and the last one she fed to the pigs. She goes around looking for them."

" "Once I saw her. My mother and father went out to dinner and my brother and I and some of his friends made a campfire. Then we heard crying. We were getting scared. She was hiding in a tree and all we could see was a black robe and an old face. We put out the fire and ran into the house."

Other variations of the story have La Llarona wearing a white cloak, chasing people and being a young, beautiful wom, but all have one common denominator--she always wails and searches for her babies.

The great majority of the legends of the area concern the battle of good versus evil. Saints appear only very rarely, but the devil seems to be having a field day among the people of the area.

Carmelita Lopez, once again, tells legends she has heard about devilish doings. "This girl had a black cat. Most of the people of the neighborhood said that it was going out at night and killing other cats. For some reason, it just seemed evil. So anyway, she made it a little bed one day and put it in there that night. The next morning all that was in the box was a circle with a pin through it, which is the sign of the devil. She never saw the cat again."

Carmelita also recalls that a man who was known as "the meanest man in the town died. They buried him as quickly as possible. When they came back to the cemetary again, a devil's footprint was on the cement of the grave,"

Another story concerning the devil is not as easy to pin down to a certain area of New Mexico. "A bishop was resting in bed one day. Suddenly, he started screaming that he saw the devil at the bottom of his bed. As everyone rushed in, he died of a heart attack," Carmelita said.

Carmelita also tells that appears to be the most widely known of all the tales of demons: "This girl was alone at home one day. She heard something making some noise at the front door. She opened up the door and there were these two babies in a basket. She looked closer and they both had horns. They started laughing and she screamed and slammed the door. When she opened the door again, both of the babies were gone."

Other vessions of the story are well known. One young couple said that they had been driving home one evening with another couple. They saw something in the road, swerved, barely missing it. They got out, picked it up and saw it was a baby. They took it into the car to take it the police. Upon further investigation, they were surprised to find that the baby was horned. Suddenly, it simply vanished.

Although both of these versions of the tale are very recent, the legends goes back at least a hundred years. Joe Aragon, approximately 65, runs a small drugstore. He attended the University of New Mexico when he was younger, but dropped out for lack of funds. He staunchly believes that most of these legends are just fantasy. He is a good storyteller and makes a story live.

Aragon's tale: "Many years ago a man was riding in the hills on horseback. He sees this bundled thing wrapped in blankets at the bottom of a bush. He picked it up and put it in front of him on the saddle. As he started again, he opened the blanket to look at the baby. The baby had horns

and was terrible looking. When the baby smiled at him, he saw that it had big teeth. The man yelled ' Quien eres tu? The baby answered 'Soy el diablo.' The man threw the baby as far as he could and took off over the mesa."

Other legends dealing with religion are also very common to the people of the area.

Saints are another especially good topic of conversation. One legend, although not coming from this area, is repeated by almost every person I interviewed. This is the legend of Santo Nino, or the child saint. It comes from Chimayo, a town north of Santa Fe. Santo Nino is a small statue of a saint. Townspeople and visitors bring items of clothing for the little child. Mostly, they bring booties. The next morning, the booties are always worn out and bits of them are found hanging on weeds outside of the church. The faithful say that he has gone out to perform miracles.

Benaires Baca Enterline, a retired Welfare worker, told of another story of a holy vision. "When I was a little girl in the '20's, Ramon Baca and his wife had a little house on Seventh Street in Belen. They noticed that a picture was appearing on the window. When they moved to Dalies Avenue, they took the window with them."

Joe Aragon recalls that when the picture first appeared he had also gone to the place to see the vision. "Someone had noticed in the gable in one of the east windows that there was a form of the Madonna. You could especially see it in the afternoons. It was a bluish thing. When I went, approximately 100 to 200 people were going to see it."

The window is still in the second floor in the house on Dalies Avenue and can clearly be seen from the street. It is still a sort of bluish haze in the shape of a human figure.

Children of the area call the two women who live in the house witches.

The wierdest story of them all in Belen concerns the Penitentes. It was told to Joe Aragon by Ramon T. Sanchez, a man in his late seventies. The tale was told to Sanchez by his grandfather and "was told as true."

Aragon says: "This happened in Sabinal when the Penitentes were strong and active. It concerned one of the original moradas." As an explanation of the story, Aragon told me that "when a man joined the Penitentes, he had to vow that he would be bound for five years, ten years or life. Every year, the men must meet at a certain place for Good Friday until their contract is up."

"This year, the mother and the grandmother of Ramon's grandfather had to go to Albuquerque during Holy Week. It was quite a distance in those days and they would be gone for a while. They left the boy with his grandfather. The frandfather decided to go and see the Penitentes public rites on Good Friday. He told the boy that they were going to the morada to see the procession, but before they went, he warned the boy, "Don't bother them, don't laught or throw rocks at them.' The bey asked 'Why?'"

"His grandfather answered, 'It happened to me. I was going to a morada when I was young along with my grandfather We left early in the morning. Nothing was really happening over there and I started to get bored. I decided to go to the hills to a cave called 'La Cueva Del Moreno.' I heard the sound of the flute. As I looked toward the cave, some men came out wearing long black gowns that covered them from head to feet. The only thing I could see was the flute sticking out from a fold near the face."

"They started walking toward town. I kept wondering who they were. I followed them and decided to have someefun. I kept pulling the gown of the last one. They kept walking. I threw a rock--they paid no attention. I sneaked over to pull the robe again, but just then the man turned and opened the robe. There stood a skeleten. I fainted and don't remember anything until late afternoon. I went back to town. Everyone was looking for me.' Apparently, the skeletens had made a pact for five or ten years and had to keep the appointment. Men who made the pact for life don't have to return after death."

Actual ghosts are representative of many things according to Mrs. Josie Gomez, about 60. Mrs. Gomez, who claims to have lived in a haunted house for a long time, is a widow and has about seven children. Mrs. Gomez says that any building that is haunted has a hidden buried treasure. The rooms where the ghost usually appears are the rooms in which the treasures are hidden.

If a person sees a ghost dressed in white it means good luck, but a ghost dressed in black is the devil himself, Mrs. Gomez said.

There are lots of stories about hauntings of individual houses or families. But one thing that Joe Aragon said is very striking. He says his grandparents home on the Rio Puerco was supposed to be haunted, with creakings, moanings and crackings sounding throughout the night. The one thing that bothered the family was the incessent tappings on the walls--which were made of adobe. The family was never able to figure how the ghost made a noise come from the mud bricks.

Hands are always coming out of walls or from under beds just as in the old vampire movies.
Carmelita Lopez says: "My sister-in-law came in from work one night and fell onto her bed. She was very tired. Both of her hands were trailing off the bed. Suddenly, something grabbed her hands. One hand was very cold and the other was very hot. Then the hands just disappeared."

Joe Aragon said that there are many tales of people being grabbed by invisitble hands by their hair.

There are various other stories, none of them quite legends, of curtains standing out on end, ladies walking in high heel shoes, faucets turning themsleves on and other typically ghostly actions.

The remainder of the supernatural happenings of the community center on the ghost lights seen often on the mesa and the witches that still turn up frequently.

The ghost lights have been seen for as long as any old man or his great-great grandparents before him have lived on the land.

"The lights are long and blue. They usually hang over bushes or weeds. It was snowing at the time we saw them. From Ladrone going north we have always seen them. They appear, jump, gonon the other side of the river. Sometimes they even appear as a passenger train, going from north to south. Some people say they are a ghost or witch. Others say that they signify that gold is buried under the spot," said Joe Aragon.

Most people have seen the ghost lights flit off as they approach them.

The last supernatural belief of the area is the belief in witches. Witch legends are all around and are still repeated, even more than the ghost legends.

One witch story represents the flavor and style of most of the legends. Joe Aragaon said, "This happened to my great-grandparents. My great-grandmother had fallen ill. Some sort of growth was coming out on her neck. They were all afraid she was going to die. This woman walked past the house every morning. She had the reputation for being a witch. My great-grandfather finally decided that the witch had cast a spell on his wife. He saddled his horse the next day and lassoed her, dragging her for quite a way. The witch started yelling, 'She's cured! She's cured!' That night the swelling went down the the growth burst. A whole handful of rice fell out."

As in any other community, Belen's legends are dying out. No one wants to hear them any more. The old men and women are taking these fascinating tales with them as they die.

It seems sad that not only a generation is dying, but also an accumulation of legends of many generations.

BNHC-3+17

GHOSTS